

Women

Women are household producers predominantly. The term “household” is distinct from the term “domestic.” Household production includes those economic activities designed to support the extended family, as well as, to satisfy community needs through certain specialized activities. “Domestic” production pertains only to women’s duties that focus on the maintenance of the household labor force and its production: food preparation for home consumption, childcare, and household/utensil maintenance. Household refers to the extended family or encampment, while domestic corresponds to the concession or tent.

The Peul and Toucouleur women are domestic and household producers. Further, they perform two sets of household production activities. Women contribute to the production processes of grain cultivation and herding; they sow, guard, weed, harvest, transport and transform grains for household consumption or sale. In the case of the Peul, tend weak and sick animals of the household herd. Since sale of grain and animals is the responsibility of men, women are remunerated indirectly for their labor in the production of these goods.

The Soninke woman is a self-proclaimed cultivator, and measures her own worth on the basis of her capacity to cultivate. While Soninke production segregates men’s cultivation areas from women’s, they complement each other. Men provide staples while women provide products for sauces. Men and women rarely work on each other’s fields although, the production from both sets of fields may be combined in times of household scarcity. Soninke women work together not only to cultivate but also to save and invest in cultivation.

Since the beginning of the drought in the early 1970’s, the government has attempted to address the needs of the rural and urban population largely through the extension of food and medical services. Women have been addressed as part of a services recipient population. Investment in women’s production has been limited to the establishment of women’s educational centers for the promotion of serving and some artisan skills. For example, the encouragement of traditional artisan production through government subsidized rug-weaving centers. The rug centers are more oriented toward conservation of traditional artisan forms than toward promotion of large-scale rug production and marketing. The women’s educational centers, suffering from lack of material support and a formulated program design, generally attract meager support in rural areas. Overall, few government or donor efforts have been made to encourage women as agricultural or herding related producers.

The duration, direction and the composition of the migrant population shifted significantly following the drought. Prolonged migration and protracted drought weight heavily on the adaptability of these systems. Declining rural productivity, limited wage-employment opportunities, low purchasing power, and aid dependence further aggravate living conditions. Some Haratine (freed slaves) and artisan Beydane women migrated in search of wage employment and marketing activities to urban areas.

Market nodes are conglomerations of vendors competing in the sale of undifferentiated products purchased from import-export licensed merchants on lines of credit. In this

market hierarch, the Haratine women are the vendors of the lower tier. Beydane women, recognizing the need to contribute to household revenues because of uncertain migrant remittances, engage in leatherworking and mat making. A benefit of more women entering into the work force is that their importance has increased as wage earners.

There are few occupational restrictions on Mauritanian women who are fortunate to receive an education. Many of these women are teachers, market traders, and some even hold high government positions.

REV 11/03